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SUBJECT: AL-SISTANI REPRESENTATIVE CONTINUES CRITICISM OF GOVERNMENT IN FRIDAY SERMON

Classified By: PolCouns Matt Tueller for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

1.(C) Summary: On Friday February 22, Al-Sayyid Ahmed al-Safi, one of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's chief representatives, urged GOI officials to come to Karbala to meet with the millions of Iraqis currently there for Arba'een commemorations. Addressing the congregation at the Imam Husayn Shrine, al-Safi resumed the criticism of the government that has marked many of his recent sermons. Highlighting the mismanagement, incompetence, and corruption plaguing the government and many of the ministries, al-Safi reminded GOI officials that with their power comes a responsibility to the people of Iraq. End summary.

2.(U) Along with Abd al Mahdi al-Karbalai, al-Safi is one of al-Sistani's chief representatives, and both of them lead prayers at the Imam Husayn Shrine in Karbala. Over the past several months, both al-Safi and al-Karbalai have been extremely critical of the Iraqi central government in Friday sermons, in particular the Council of Representatives (COR) and the various government ministries and departments. In his most recent sermon, al-Safi continued in this vein, calling on officials to come to Karbala during the week of Arba'een to listen to the concerns and grievances of their constituents in regard to the ministries and departments.

3.(U) Al-Safi posited that the central government bears responsibility for the current situation. Moreover, in light of the considerable human and material sacrifices that Iraqis have made for the country, al-Safi reminded GOI officials that as elected officials, they have a responsibility to the people. To al-Safi, this includes the provision of competent and capable government officials, organizations, and services.

4.(U) Commenting on the proposed cabinet reshuffle, al-Safi implied that the marja'iya does not care how the Maliki government arranges the ministries, just that they do it. Adding that the previous year has given the government ample time to evaluate the performance of its ministers, he reiterated his earlier call of "making 2008 the year of eliminating administrative and financial corruption." Stressing the importance of resolute and decisive action, al-Safi repeated the need for reform within the government.

5.(C) Comment: For the last several months, public and private criticism of the GOI by al-Sistani and his representatives has been widespread, signaling an extreme displeasure with the status quo. Ministerial reform though, remains stalled. By continuing to bring it up in both public and private fora, it is clear that al-Sistani is not going to let this issue go away, even if the GOI remains unwilling or unable to act. This recent round of criticism, coming on the eve of the Arba'een commemoration, raises the stakes, as it will surely be on the minds and tongues of many Iraqis who have gathered in Karbala.

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